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SUBJECT: NIP AND TUCK IN MOROCCO

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Lured by the country's geographic and linguistic proximity, Europeans are slowly taking notice of Morocco's low-cost, high-quality cosmetic and dental care. Treatment in Morocco can cost about 25 to 45 percent less than the same procedures in Europe. Several cosmetic and dental surgeons have already built European accredited state-of-the-art medical facilities in Casablanca and Marrakech, designed to attract Europe's patients. More importantly, government officials believe this industry can help bolster the country's declining tourism while simultaneously improving its health care infrastructure. Challenges remain, however, including the scarcity of qualified specialists and questions about the long-term sustainability of this industry. End Summary.

Nip and Tuck In Morocco

¶2. (SBU) In recent years, Europeans have gradually taken notice of Morocco's low-cost, high quality cosmetic and dental care. Depending on the medical procedure, treatment in Morocco can cost about 25 to 45 percent less than the same procedures in Western Europe, reports Paris' Center for Policy Analysis (PCPA). The low costs are attributable not just to salaries of medical professionals, but also to the low costs of malpractice insurance and minimal administrative costs, PCPA adds. Majd Chraibi, who owns Marrakech's European accredited "Lipo Mince Center," says that a liposuction treatment that would cost USD 8000 in Europe can be done by a Moroccan surgeon for USD 4800. While surgical costs in Morocco are generally higher than those of Southeast Asian countries known for medical tourism, Morocco's geographic and linguistic proximity make it a particularly attractive destination for European patients.

A Win-Win Situation

¶3. (SBU) Morocco is slowly realizing the value of medical tourism, and "there are initiatives at the government level and at the individual clinic level to try to lure tourists from the U.S., Western Europe, and Canada," says Mohamed Guessous, one of the country's preeminent plastic surgeons. Government authorities tasked with developing Morocco's tourism plan, in conjunction with the National Association of Private Clinics, are in discussions about potential areas of cooperation, specifically offering medical facilities fiscal incentives. The incentives would include a corporate holiday tax during the first five years of business and training grants for each Moroccan employee during the first three years of employment.

¶4. (SBU) According to the consulting firm McKinsey and Company, this niche industry will likely "improve the country's health care infrastructure and subsequently increase its allure to foreign

patients". This environment also creates opportunities that encourage Morocco's top medical professionals to remain in country. Mohammed Mbarky, who operates the Oriental's regional development agency, said "The region is upgrading all its hospitals to European Union standards in order to promote medical tourism". (Note: The Oriental, is one of Morocco's 16 regions and occupies the northeast corner of the Kingdom. End Note.)

Not So Fast

15. (SBU) Challenges remain, however. Chief among them is the dearth of qualified cosmetic and dental surgeons. Some industry professionals like Faad Benslimane, one of the country's leading plastic surgeons, warn that a business plan based on cosmetic surgery, including areas like dentistry and dermatological treatment, is likely not sustainable in the long term unless the country is able to retain this group of medical professionals. To help with retention, private institutions like Casablanca's "Polyclinique Dentaire", whose clientele is mostly European, recruit and train Morocco's best and brightest dentists on their premises, and offer successful trainees employment in their clinic.

16. (SBU) Comment: With 2009 tourism revenues currently 19 percent lower than 2008, efforts to diversify the country's tourism industry can only help Moroccan operators. While cosmetic and dental care is still relatively nascent in Morocco, it is a sector with large potential that could also attract U.S. patients seeking low-cost alternatives. More importantly, developments in this field help improve the country's health care infrastructure and subsequently retain Morocco's top medical professionals. End Comment.

ORDONEZ